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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MADRID 000741

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [CU](#) [CO](#) [SP](#) [VZ](#)

SUBJECT: MFA READOUT OF CUBA/VENEZUELA DISCUSSIONS IN WASHINGTON

REF: A. A) STATE 29323

[1](#)B. B) MADRID 703

Classified By: Political Counselor Kathy Fitzpatrick; reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action message. Please see request for guidance on Venezuela in paras 4 and 15.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary. MFA Director General for Latin America Javier Sandomingo requested a meeting with polcouns on February 24 to discuss his recent meetings at the Department and the NSC, which he said had gone very well. Sandomingo said he believed Spain shared a "common vision" with the USG on our broad objectives in Cuba despite our tactical differences and that there was an opportunity for coordinated efforts to improve human rights conditions. He assured polcouns that EU missions in Havana would soon put into effect a "structured dialogue" with the opposition to demonstrate continued EU support for democracy activists. He said the MFA would also instruct the Spanish Embassy in Havana to increase its own contact with dissidents. Polcouns welcomed the news on the beginning of a structured outreach to the dissidents since this was supposed to be a key element in the easing of the EU's restrictive measures. Regarding assertions of a "common vision," however, polcouns noted that there was still considerable doubt in Washington regarding the EU's recent overtures to Castro, which we believe strengthen Castro at the expense of the opposition and will be used by Castro to undermine USG-EU unity in favor of democratic reforms. Sandomingo confirmed that Cuban Foreign Minister Perez Roque will visit Madrid March 14-15.

[1](#)3. (C) On Venezuela, Sandomingo said Spain hopes to use its influence with Chavez to halt the erosion of democratic rights in Venezuela, end Chavez' regional adventurism, and ease Colombian-Venezuelan tensions. Spain's view, he said, was that Chavez should not be isolated as long as there is a chance he can be turned back from his current course. He said there has been no final decision on the composition of the Spanish weapons sale to Venezuela, nor on whether Zapatero will travel to Venezuela in late March. Polcouns said the weapons sale and the Zapatero visit to Caracas were not consistent with Spain's stated objectives in Venezuela, since they would only embolden Chavez' negative tendencies and play into Chavez' hands as he will exploit any perceived split in our policies. Sandomingo admitted that he was not optimistic that Chavez could be deviated from his path, but said Spain was determined to try. Polcouns again noted that it was difficult to understand how Spain's gestures, rather than a common policy of pressure to reform, would influence Chavez. Sandomingo (protect) admitted that the 2004 decision not to sell tanks to Colombia had been made in response to appeals to halt the sale by unnamed NGOs that had aided Zapatero's electoral campaign. He urged WHA A/S Noriega to visit Madrid at the earliest opportunity to discuss possible areas of U.S.-Spain cooperation in Latin America.

[1](#)4. (C) This meeting and previous discussions with Sandomingo's subordinates reveal considerable unease within the MFA regarding weapons sales to Venezuela. If we want to influence Spain's decision, we should do so as soon as possible. Press reports indicate Zapatero's trip to Caracas is scheduled for March 28-30 and the GOS will surely make a decision on the final weapons package prior to that visit. We may not be able to prevent a sale, but we should at least highlight the contradiction of selling large quantities of weapons to Chavez at the same time that Spain claims to be trying to ease Colombian-Venezuelan tensions. On Cuba, the MFA may be feeling defensive, but we have little confidence that Zapatero feels pressure to demonstrate Spain/EU commitment to the democratic opposition. The proof will come in the nature of the EU's engagement with dissidents in the coming months. Action request: Post requests Department guidance on the issue of the Spanish weapons sales to Venezuela. End Summary.

//CUBA//

[1](#)5. (C) Sandomingo said he had had excellent meetings on both Cuba and Venezuela with A/S Noriega and with NSC Senior Director for Latin America Tom Shannon. On Cuba, Sandomingo expressed his conviction that there that the USG and GOS shared "the same vision" for Cuba's future, to include a peaceful transition to democracy that would include a role

for the opposition. He said Spain and the USG are also of a similar mind on the need to improve political conditions in Cuba even while Castro remained in power. Sandomingo said that differences would obviously remain on the question of how to achieve these objectives, including Spain's negative view of the U.S. embargo and rejection of Helms Burton, but said he was certain that there was ample room for bilateral cooperation on Cuba beyond these differences.

16. (C) Sandomingo said he understood from his meetings in Washington that the USG wanted to see clear evidence that the new EU approach on Cuba did not imply diminished support for pro-democracy activists. He said that EU heads of mission in Havana were to meet on February 24 to "determine concrete modalities for putting into effect the EU's structured dialogue with the opposition." He promised to share a copy of the report on the Havana COM meeting with the Embassy and said he expected the initial meeting to be primarily "symbolic." EU missions in Havana would invite 20-25 dissident leaders to a luncheon or reception for discussions, with minimal objectives on substance. Though it would be a closed meeting, the EU participants would release a press statement at the end to draw public attention to the event. (NOTE: Sandomingo later said that the EU was trying to avoid too much publicity in order to prevent an immediate confrontation with the Cuban government over the issue. END NOTE.) Future meetings would be in the form of working sessions and would probably involve fewer dissidents at a time, given the differences among the various groups. Apart from participating in broader EU contacts with the opposition, Sandomingo said the Spanish Embassy in Havana would be issued "specific instructions" to engage activists on a bilateral basis. He said the Spanish Embassy had always been in the forefront in supporting the opposition in Havana, recalling his own experience in Cuba as the Spanish charge d'affaires in the mid 1990s.

17. (C) Polcouns welcomed Sandomingo's readout and information on the EU's next steps in Cuba, but cautioned that there were still grave doubts in Washington regarding the EU's course and actions thus far. The USG has seen months of overtures to Castro, but little to substantiate Spain's commitment to balance the easing of the EU's restrictive measures with greater outreach to the opposition. In our view, the visit of PSOE President Chaves to meet with Castro and (briefly) with the opposition had been a failure and a gift to the Castro regime. Moreover, we'd seen the news that Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque would soon visit Madrid, giving Castro another chance to claim victory over the EU's previous tough stance on Cuba. Sandomingo said that the USG would soon see concrete EU measures to ramp up contact with dissidents and insisted that Spain and the EU are not "giving Castro any gifts" in the new relationship. He confirmed that Perez Roque would be in Madrid March 14-15 and said that immediately after that visit he and Cuba desk officer Pablo Gomez de Olea would travel to Miami for meetings with Cuban exile groups.

//VENEZUELA//

18. (C) Sandomingo called Venezuela "a much more complex" issue than Cuba, though again he said that the USG and Spain shared a similar outlook. "The only difference is that Spain believes that Chavez is on his way to becoming another Castro, while the USG believes he already is another Castro. We don't believe that now is the time to isolate Venezuela, since that would only push Chavez in a negative direction." Sandomingo outlined Spain's top three priorities in Venezuela:

1A. Help preserve the freedoms that still exist, including freedom of the press and independent political parties. He acknowledged that these and other centers of independent thought were under continuing assault by the Chavez government.

1B. Convince Chavez not to involve himself in foreign adventures in the region.

1C. Prevent conflict between Colombia and Venezuela.

19. (C) Sandomingo said that while the USG had many levers of influence over Venezuela and could apply painful pressure if necessary, Spain had far more limited options. He said Spain had gained Chavez' confidence and was now analyzing how to use that influence in support of the objectives described above. Spain's policies towards Venezuela were also conditioned by the fact that Chavez was, "for the moment," a legally elected leader and therefore a legitimate interlocutor.

110. (C) Polcouns replied that the USG could not understand Spain's proposed weapons sale (ref B) and President Zapatero's plans to visit Caracas in March in the context of the objectives discussed by Sandomingo. Chavez would only be emboldened by his belief that Spain, and therefore the EU, somehow endorsed his undemocratic actions or was at the very least prepared to ignore his autocratic tendencies. The USG

did not seek to isolate Chavez, but we were deeply concerned that Chavez was steering Venezuela and the region towards a serious crisis. We also believed that a common voice pressuring for reform would have more influence on Chavez than Spain's gestures.

11. (C) Sandomingo said that neither the weapons sale nor President Zapatero's plans to visit Venezuela had been finalized. He described the proposed weapons package for Venezuela as the subject of a vigorous internal debate, with the guiding principle a determination not to provide materials that could be transferred by Chavez to subversive groups or militias. Sandomingo became flustered when pressed for details on the types of vessels being considered for sale to Venezuela and for clarity on how the final decision would be made, making clear that final decisions would be made at a high political level. He noted that the commercial value of the deal (over USD 700 million and potentially up to USD 1 billion) would be critical in light of the importance such a sale would have for Spain's cash-strapped Izar Shipyards.

12. (C) Sandomingo said no final decision had been made regarding Zapatero's possible visit to Caracas. He said that if Zapatero does go to see Chavez, he will also go to Colombia to demonstrate that Spain is not siding with Chavez. Also, while in Venezuela Zapatero would make it a point to have several meetings with the political opposition. When polcouns questioned how Spain would get it's message across under Chavez' headlines on the visit, Sandomingo expressed confidence that Spain would be able to publicize its sessions with the opposition.

Sandomingo emphasized that Spain was keeping Colombia informed on the weapons deal and that the Colombians had given their approval. Polcouns expressed concern that Chavez would nevertheless turn the Zapatero visit into a propaganda coup. Interestingly, Sandomingo (protect) raised Zapatero's 2004 decision not to follow through on former president Aznar's sale of tanks to Colombia, admitting that unspecified Spanish NGOs had persuaded Zapatero to withdraw the offer. He said Zapatero's advisers had felt indebted to these NGOs, which had helped get him elected, and had bent to their demands.

13. (U) Sandomingo asked that we reiterate his invitation made in Washington for A/S Noriega to visit Spain. He said A/S Noriega would be assured good high-level meetings and that it would help both sides identify potential areas for cooperation.

//COMMENT//

14. (C) For the past several months, we have used every opportunity to signal the USG's concerns with respect to Madrid's overtures to Chavez. This meeting with Sandomingo and previous discussions with his subordinates reveal considerable unease within the MFA regarding weapons sales to Venezuela. If we want to influence Spain's decision, we should do so as soon as possible. Press reports indicate Zapatero's trip to Caracas is scheduled for March 28-30 and the GOS will surely make a decision on the final weapons package prior to that visit. We may not be able to prevent a sale, but we should at least highlight the contradiction of selling large quantities of weapons to Chavez at the same time that Spain claims to be trying to ease Colombian-Venezuelan tensions. On Cuba, the MFA may be feeling defensive, but we have little confidence that Zapatero feels pressure to demonstrate Spain/EU commitment to the democratic opposition. The proof will come in the nature of the EU's engagement with dissidents in the coming months.

//ACTION REQUEST//

15. (C) Recent events supersede the points we have used in previous discussions with the GOS on Venezuela, therefore post requests Department guidance on the issue of Spanish weapons sales to Caracas. We would like to convey to the GOS a clear USG message regarding our concerns on the sale so that they can factor in our response during the course of their internal deliberations.

MANZANARES